

7-1-1964

The Sangerfest of 1898

William F. Betterton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Betterton, William F. "The Sangerfest of 1898." *The Palimpsest* 45 (1964), 293-300.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol45/iss7/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

The Sangerfest of 1898

"Willkommen!" Huge signs greeted singing societies from Midwestern towns as they arrived in Davenport on the evening of July 27, 1898, to participate in the great *Sängerfest* or singing festival. The first societies to arrive were from Elkader and Manning, followed by groups from La Crosse and Eau Claire in Wisconsin, Elgin and Peoria in Illinois, and St. Louis, Missouri. Fast on their heels came other musical societies, by train and steamboat. Each group was escorted by a brass band to Turner Hall to join the revelry of the German societies from Davenport and Rock Island which were already assembled for the four-day festivities.

The tradition of these musical gatherings which united the many German *Sängerbunds*, or musical societies, dates back to 1847 when the first Northwest *Sängerbund* originated in Milwaukee after two German singing societies united. Their public concerts attracted much attention and stimulated the cultivation of music in the area. Hans Balatka, who arrived in Milwaukee in 1849, succeeded in uniting the musical talent of that city into one great society, and shortly after, in the spring of 1852, the first Northwest *Sängerfest* took place. Three years later, in 1855, delegates from societies in Illinois,

Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin met at Milwaukee at the suggestion of Balatka to establish the Northwest *Sängerbund* and to hold its second festival.

Davenport acted as host for the third festival of the *Sängerbund* from June 30 to July 2, 1858. The three-day celebration opened with a concert at Metropolitan Hall, directed by Hans Balatka, conductor of the Milwaukee Opera. The Davenport *Männerchor*, the oldest singing society of the city, was judged the best singing society at this festival.

During the Civil War the *Sängerbund* ceased to function, and it was not until 1865 that another festival was held, this time at La Crosse. Subsequent festivals took place at Milwaukee, Watertown, Madison, Dubuque, Burlington, Quincy, Galena, Freeport, Chicago, St. Louis, and Minneapolis.

Davenport was not to be outdone by the splendor and pageantry of the above celebrations. When this justly famous "Queen City of the West" had its second opportunity to serve as host for the *Sängerfest* of 1898, the Germans staged one of the grandest affairs ever held in Davenport. Preparations were begun two years in advance, or shortly after a delegation from the *Männerchor* secured Davenport as the site for this biennial celebration. Ten of the major singing societies of Davenport united in 1896 to organize the festival. Among these groups were the Claus Groth Singing

Society, the Harugaria *Männerchor*, the Teutonia Singers, the Northwest Davenport Liederstafel, the *Vorwaertz* Singers, the Concordia Singing Society, the West Davenport Singing Society, the Davenport Turner's Singing Sections, and the Davenport *Männerchor*, all leading German musical societies of the city.

At their initial meetings which were held at John Schnaak's Hall, at Turner Hall, and at Claus Groth Hall, this group, known as the United Singers of Davenport, adopted a constitution and by-laws for their organization, and they also chose the songs that would be sung at a fund-raising concert to be given prior to the fest. John Berwald and John Schnaak of Davenport were elected president and vice president respectively.

In November of that year, Mr. Moritz Herling of Milwaukee, president of the Northwest *Sängerbund*, was a guest of the local singers when the twenty-first conference of the officers of the *Sängerbund* was held in Davenport. Theodore Reese, who was at one time leader of the *Männerchor*, Strasser's Band, and many other prominent Davenport musical groups, was appointed to serve with Theodore Kelbe of Milwaukee and Henry Von Oppen of Chicago as a committee to select music for the coming *Sängerfest*. Also at that time the motto "O gruene fort und bluehe lang In unserm Bund, du Deutscher Sang" was adopted for the fest. A prize of twenty-five dollars was later

awarded to Professor Reese for setting this motto to music.

Fund raising drives, which included concerts by the ten participating Davenport societies, flourished. Donations were received from many German organizations of the community, as well as from businesses and individuals. The John Deere Company donated their newest model plow, valued at forty dollars. A four-day fund raising fair opened at Turner and Claus Groth halls on November 24, 1897. Another item sold to secure funds for the *Sängerfest* was a sticker that could be attached to correspondence. It bore a design of a harp entwined by a steamship and was inscribed, "*Sängerfest*, July 23-31, 1898."

One of the biggest problems which the Germans faced in preparing for the fest was the location of the festivities within the city. Since there was no adequate building available to them at that time, plans were formulated in 1897 for a fest hall which was to be erected especially for this important event. A bid submitted by Oelerich Company was accepted early in 1898, and an auditorium 102' x 225' without posts or galleries, was built with special consideration for acoustical properties. The seating capacity of the hall, which was located at Fourth and Green Streets, was three thousand while the stage could accommodate twelve hundred persons. Long distance telephones were installed in the hall to enable persons in all parts of

the country to hear the programs of the fest. They could also be used by the almost thirty newspaper reporters hailing from a half dozen states.

Excellent physical facilities and a well-trained chorus were essential to the success of the fest. In 1897, weekly rehearsals began at Turner Hall by the participating societies. With the addition of the Ladies' Harmonie Chorus and the Schubert Glee Club the number of Davenport societies increased to twelve. Six months prior to the celebration, the societies from the singing section of the Turners of Rock Island and Moline joined the Davenport vocalists in their rehearsals. One hundred and twenty vocalists were present at a rehearsal in March, 1898.

Plans were formulating smoothly for the *Sängerfest* until an event took place which saddened those who were making the preparations. Less than two months before the fest, its secretary, Adolph Weise, upon whom many of the responsibilities for the preparations had lain, died. Mr. Weise, an active member of both the Davenport Turners Singing Society and the Davenport *Männerchor*, was buried June 7, 1898. The proposed *Sängerfest* orchestra and the United Singers of Davenport provided music for his funeral services. His successor, Mr. H. L. Wagner, was named secretary shortly after, and he continued to make the final arrangements for the fest.

These preparations included the training of one

thousand children from the Davenport schools by their beloved music instructor, Professor Ernst Otto to sing "Die Wacht am Rhein" in German and the "Star Spangled Banner" in English. Three days of diligent volunteer work was required to decorate the streets of the city and the *Sängerfest* Hall. The final rehearsal was held the evening before the first concert, with the orchestra and chorus rehearsing past midnight at the Coliseum.

The *Sängerfest* program opened officially July 28 with a reception concert directed by Theodore R. Reese. This was followed by a welcome address by the fest's president. Vocal selections were rendered by Miss Pauline Woltmann, a mezzo-soprano from Rock Island, by the United Singers, by the children's chorus, and by the other individual singing societies.

On the following night another concert was presented at *Sängerfest* Hall, with Theodore Reese again directing the orchestra. Featured again as soloist was Miss Pauline Woltmann. Several of the individual singing societies as well as a mass chorus of fourteen hundred voices also sang.

Davenport's musicians figured prominently in all of the concerts of the fest. A feature of the matinee concert on Saturday, July 30, was a cornet solo by Professor C. F. Toenniges, director of the Ladies' Harmonie Society, Strasser's Band, and other choral and instrumental groups of Davenport. Sharing the honors as the featured musician was

the vocal soloist of the day, Miss Emma "Poddie" Ross of Davenport. Miss Ross was a graduate of the Pashall Souvestre Italian School in Dresden. She studied with Oreste Bimboni of Florence and with Carlo Carignani of Milan. During one of the most enthusiastic ovations ever received in Davenport, Miss Ross was presented with a beautiful armful of roses. Later, on August 17, 1898, Miss Ross was honored for her *Sängerfest* triumph by the Davenport Business Men's Association. Twenty-five hundred music lovers attended a testimonial concert given in her honor at the *Sängerfest* Hall and they presented her with one thousand dollars as a token of their gratitude.

Another of Davenport's vocalists, Miss Bertha Sonntag, was a featured soloist at the second grand evening concert on July 30, 1898. Miss Sonntag later graduated with high honors from the Royal Academy at Munich. She appeared in many Davenport community performances.

The closing day of the *Sängerfest* was Sunday, July 31. Fifty singing societies and a dozen bands participated in a parade which originated at the corner of Third and Scott streets at nine o'clock a.m. It was a colorful procession as the paraders wearing uniforms and the light grey hat, the official dress of the *Sängerfest*, paraded to the park where nearly twelve thousand people attended an informal picnic. Each of the participating groups set up its standards on the ground to proudly ad-

vertise its own singing society. During the day, the societies exchanged visits, sang, listened to speeches, recitations, and band music. It was a fitting close for the four days' activities.

Because of the great success of the *Sängerfest* and the enthusiasm resulting therefrom, the United Singers voted to continue as a permanent society. The eighty-five active members elected to use Turner Hall as headquarters for both rehearsals and regular meetings.

The enthusiasm displayed in the two *Sänger-fests* which were held in Davenport was a significant testimony of the German people's love for music. These festivals were representative of other conventions which were held during that period in cities throughout the country. They help to illustrate the important effect that German culture has had upon the musical development of the State of Iowa as well as upon the musical development of the entire United States.

WILLIAM F. BETTERTON